

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 991

RC 023 007

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TITLE The Rural Education Dichotomy: Disadvantaged Systems and School Strengths.  
INSTITUTION North Central Regional Educational Lab., Elmhurst, IL.  
PUB DATE 2001-00-00  
NOTE 10p.  
AVAILABLE FROM For full text:  
<http://www.ncrel.org/policy/pubs/html/dichot.htm>.  
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; \*Consolidated Schools; \*Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Futures (of Society); \*Politics of Education; \*Rural Education; Rural Schools; \*School Districts; Small Schools  
IDENTIFIERS \*Rural Suburban Differences

## ABSTRACT

The educational advantages conferred by rurality and smallness have their greatest impact at the school and classroom level, but this same rurality creates district or system-level problems that have often been solved by consolidation. Consolidation efforts have been waning because they are politically unpopular, good economic times allow states to prop up unnecessarily small districts, and courts have adopted a noneconomic meaning of "efficiency." The next wave of consolidation will be driven by the suburbanization of rurality, the homogenization of education resulting from the adoption of common academic standards and accountability structures, and the pervasive influence of corporate mergers. The dichotomy facing rural education today is how to reap the systemwide benefits of consolidation, such as efficient use of funds and more specialization of human resources, while not disrupting the many effective rural educational practices, such as personalization of learning and the sense of community. Ideas for addressing this dichotomy include: regionalizing the property tax base; considering additional funding or weightings; providing greater flexibility in accounting; tying school districts into overarching rural development initiatives; and providing incentives for consolidation where it truly needs to happen. The test for deciding to consolidate should be whether more and varied learning opportunities can be made available to children in a consolidated setting for approximately the same amount of money spent in two or more weaker school systems. (TD)



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## The Rural Education Dichotomy: Disadvantaged Systems and School Strengths

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To the typical metropolitan resident, the rural school evokes a pleasant image from times past—a past free from those problems of the city, such as poverty, violence, and drugs. Educators who teach in rural areas know better. The reality is that rural schools have a great deal in common with their urban counterparts. But while rural schools share many of the same problems as urban schools, they generally receive far less attention from the media, lawmakers, and the policy community than their city cousins. Indeed, Alan DeYoung at the University of Kentucky has argued that improvement and reform for rural schools "has typically been inspired from urban and state places and agendas rather than from rural ones" (DeYoung, 1998, p. 1).

There have been some favorable changes in rural demographics and economic conditions from the robust national growth and expansion of the 1990s, with the overall rural poverty rate declining slightly but steadily since 1993. However, the rural household poverty rate of 15.6 percent remains higher than the urban rate of 13.4 percent, and this gap has been consistent for the past decade (Huang, 1999). Also, a recent study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2000) found that adolescents in rural America are more likely—in the case of eighth graders, twice as likely—than their urban peers to have tried drugs. In general, both rural and urban systems suffer from high rates of student poverty, funding inequities, cultural isolation, and a general lack of resources to support world-class educational programs.

It is ironic, though, that recent calls for school reform nationally—especially in urban settings—mirror the positive and beneficial aspects seen in rural schools. Most notable in this vein is a rejection of the philosophy that "bigger is better." Many of the commonly acknowledged strengths of rural and small schools have been emphasized as hallmarks of the reform movement for nearly two decades now. Harvard University's Vito Perrone believes that schools that stay small provide richer educational opportunities for students (Harvard University, 1996). Research in Chicago demonstrates that students in smaller high schools outperform the city as a whole in both reading and mathematics

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This policy monograph asserts that the educational advantages conferred by rurality and smallness have their greatest impact at the school and classroom level, but this same rurality creates problems at the school district or system level. As such, the traditional weaknesses attributed to rural education are best attacked at the district level—and, yes, may sometimes be optimally addressed by consolidation. This dichotomy is the puzzle of rural education today: How do we reap the systemwide benefits of consolidation (e.g., greater efficiency in use of funds, more specialization of human resources) and how should we respond to future calls for consolidation, while not disrupting the many effective educational practices (e.g., personalization of learning, the sense of community) seen at the rural school site?

In an attempt to address this question, we will first examine why recent consolidation efforts have waned across the states. Next, we will look at a set of demographic and social changes—collectively referred to as the "suburbanization" of rural America—that has the potential for reshaping the rural education landscape. The influence of suburbanization, compounded by both the academic standards movement and an extensive corporate metaphor at work in American education today, could exert the next big push we see for rural school consolidation. We close with a consideration of ideas proposed in other settings—and primarily financial in nature—to access the benefits of rural *district* consolidation, without jeopardizing the advantages conferred by rurality at the *school* level.

### **The Disappearing Threat of Consolidation**

The first big wave of school consolidation in the United States came with the closing of the one-room country schools to form unit school districts, primarily in the 1930s and 40s. However, rural school district consolidation reached even greater proportions in the 1950s and 60s. The post-World War II baby boom strained the capacity of many schools, rural and otherwise, to service their burgeoning student populations. At the same time, the inexpensive fuel and federal highway building of that era contributed to the significance of the yellow school bus for transporting pupils—essential for this second wave of consolidation to take place.

The 1980s and 90s brought another minor push for consolidation in a number of states, without much result. At various times during that period, Iowa, Oklahoma, Texas, and a number of other states considered the need for and benefits of consolidation. As part of an omnibus school reform package in 1985, Illinois required that consolidation studies be carried out. Bear in mind, only the studies—not actual consolidations—were required in Illinois at that time; but such subtleties were lost on the seemingly thousands of parents who crowded into meetings around the state in which regional committees were considering various consolidation plans. While some school reorganizations did subsequently take place in Illinois, and an attractive financial package was put in place as an incentive for consolidating districts, the actions in

Illinois and other states did not lead to a third wave of school consolidation as some had predicted.

As we enter the twenty-first century, statewide efforts in support of consolidation have been largely abandoned across the country. One obvious reason for this move is that consolidation is seen as political suicide, especially for school board members and state legislators. In fact, school consolidation is probably the greatest disruptor to a rural community's status quo. In rural settings, the school is figuratively (and sometimes literally) at the center of a small town and its environs. The rural school fulfills an integrative function as it defines the community and represents it to the larger world (Tyack, 1974). Extremely small elementary districts can even be found in certain suburban areas. In these situations, any discussion of unit consolidation is often viewed as a threat to the beloved neighborhood school and another encroachment as evil as the ubiquitous strip malls and housing subdivisions.

Two other factors also work to downplay previous threats of consolidation in the states. The first has to do with the fact that state finances are flush and the coffers are overflowing. Good economic times allow states to prop up unnecessarily small school districts because they have the means to do so. In general, the larger the number of small systems within a given state, a relatively larger amount of state support is needed to approach funding equity and maintain an adequate foundation level across all districts. Theoretically speaking, it should be easier to maintain some semblance of equity across just 10 school districts, say, than 100 districts—or 1,000.

The second not-so-obvious reason we have failed to see a third wave of consolidation centers around a somewhat arcane legal argument. Numerous states' constitutions contain a clause requiring a "thorough and efficient" (T & E) system of public schools; but courts issuing school finance decisions in rural states have wholeheartedly rejected economic definitions of the efficiency construct in these T & E clauses. Rural schools' small size and critical relationship to the community have influenced the meaning of *efficiency* within the education finance systems of most rural states. The outcome of this redefinition is that the courts have accepted a narrow, noneconomic meaning of efficiency that has effectively taken away this potential challenge to the existence of (generally) more inefficient rural school systems (Dunn, 1999).

It seems clear that while consolidation is still viewed with derision in those communities in which it was once feared, it is no longer regarded as a *fait accompli* for the traditionally small, rural school. Rather, it is the premise of this analysis that a national trend toward suburbanization is what will most change the face of rural America—and concomitantly, its schools. The influence of suburbanization, in conjunction with a constellation of accountability demands and corporate values circling American education today, may ultimately lead us toward consolidation in its worst form: consolidation in which the unique personalizing benefits of the small school are lost without gaining any of the potential benefits of reorganization at the system level.

## The Suburbanization of Rurality

National influence moves as people move—and people are moving to the suburbs. Not only has this trend been noted by demographers, it has been covered in the popular press as well, with articles in *Newsweek* and other publications. With this population shift toward the suburbs, political power and decision making follow. In states that have been witnesses to this tremendous suburban growth, even political coalitions between urban and rural areas can barely contain the power wielded by their cousins in the suburbs.

These urban-rural coalitions have often formed in response to the inequities in school funding across the states. But systems as diverse as Cleveland and Cincinnati—coupled with almost 500 districts from rural Ohio—could not find a legislative solution to their funding problems that would pass muster in that state's General Assembly. As is often the case in school finance disputes, the districts went to court for redress. The same situation currently holds true in Illinois, after urban and rural districts were spurned in their bid to have the Illinois Supreme Court correct the funding inequities in that state.

The Ohio and Illinois cases simply illustrate a similar set of conditions across any number of states: From a school governance point of view, political power and influence reside in the suburbs—along with the people.

Much notice has been given lately to demographic patterns of in-migration back to the country, as primarily high-income families grow tired of the congestion of the cities and as work options such as telecommuting permit wage earners to leave the office towers that dot urban and suburban areas. But even this phenomenon contributes to the suburbanization of rurality. With this rural in-migration, returning families bring the suburban culture with them. They are typically well-to-do and looking for the same level of educational standards and services they found in their former suburban schools. As these individuals gain seats on school boards and otherwise exert their influence, they will create a dramatically different dynamic for rural school governance.

Even the ideas for rural economic development that are commonly forwarded compound the suburbanization of our rural areas. New economic growth in these areas is generally meant to address the double threat to economic stability and a declining quality of life in rural settings. But the new rural economy is not predicated on the traditional agricultural or small business jobs that have long supported the rural economy. Instead, suggestions for improving rural economic development note that its focus should be on job growth that will lead to out-migration from suburban and metropolitan areas (Gunter & Gunter, 1997). To that end, then, ideas for supporting economic growth in rural areas have highlighted such things as tourism, small "boutique" businesses, "digitalsmithing," and other technologically based employment. More directly put, rural America is not as much seeking the creation of new and unique kinds of jobs as it is

capitalizing on the relocation of jobs that are attractive to suburban residents.

Taken together, these phenomena create the suburbanization of rurality. This suburbanization happens gradually, but surely—as political power coalesces in the burgeoning suburbs, as former suburbanites return to populate shrinking rural communities, and as rural America emulates its suburban neighbors to prevent itself from becoming a twenty-first century ghost town. Reflecting this growing trend toward suburbanization, the prototypical suburban school likewise takes on the mantle of the "one best way" or dominant model for educating children.

### **Compounding Factors**

Two other issues, considered in conjunction with the effect of suburbanization, will serve to compound the push for rural school consolidation. One is the homogenization of education taking place across nearly every state with the adoption of common academic standards and accountability structures. In this situation, it is the cutting-edge, lighthouse school districts that inform legislators and policymakers in setting the model educational practices for all schools in a state.

Of course, these schools are quite often the ones with the most resources with which to experiment and support a variety of reform efforts that catch everyone's eye—that is, those in wealthy suburban areas. Indeed, the June 1999 edition of NCREL's *Policy Issues* reported on the success of the First in the World Consortium, a group of 18 suburban Chicago school districts that have attained some of the highest scores in the world on international exams. But given their already-stressed financial, human, and technical resources, it will be virtually impossible for most rural school systems to imitate this level of success without consolidation or some other form of reorganization. As suburban schools continue to set the bar for states' reform initiatives, pressure for rural school consolidation will increase.

Secondly, we should not discount the pervasive influence of corporate marriages and megamergers that have dominated the American business scene over roughly the past decade. This period has been witness to some of the largest couplings of corporate entities in history. Terms such as "synergy" and "symbiosis" are used to tout the benefits from ever-larger organizational structures in business and industry.

Public schools operate under a heavy corporate metaphor. In fact, it is hard to find educational discussions these days that don't sound like stockholders' meetings. We talk about re-engineering schools to think outside the box so we can better market an educational product to our core clientele. Indeed, there is no reason for talk about mergers and "right-sizing" to be any less a part of the education discourse than it is at Time-Warner-AOL. Unless the tax base and other resources to fund a crazy quilt of rural districts in the states expand (to help them meet increasingly stringent statewide teaching and learning standards), it is counterintuitive to think that the siren call of mergers and

consolidation will escape rural schools much longer.

### **Helping Rural School Districts: Consolidation and Otherwise**

Given these new factors mediating toward rural school consolidation, the challenge for rural educators and policymakers is to figure out how to leverage the benefits that can come from consolidation while maintaining the close and intricate relationships between rural communities and their schools. All of this is not to say that consolidation should never take place. Certainly, unnecessarily small rural districts exist that are being kept open on the backs of their students, without minimally adequate programs, faculty, facilities, and resources. In these cases, it is a dereliction of duty of administrators, school boards, and other policymaking groups to not give careful consideration to whether or not consolidation can provide for a fuller, richer educational offering to the pupils affected. But more often, the importance of the schools' integrative function in rural communities will cause consolidation to be resisted as long as possible.

This monograph closes with a few ideas for supporting rural districts in the meantime, so their schools can remain vibrant.

- **Regionalize the property tax base.** There can be a wide variation in the property tax base from one rural area to the next, depending upon differences in crops, land values, the extent of light industry, and the like. The small rural system lucky enough to have a nuclear power plant within its boundaries literally cannot get all of its tax dollars spent in a given year. Thus, regionalizing all commercial and industrial property across a county or some larger area (e.g., the coverage area of the power plant), for example, increases equity for rural districts and allows a greater number of rural students to "share the wealth" where it does exist.
- **Consider additional funding or weightings.** As suburban populations, through their duly elected representatives in the statehouses, set their school funding priorities, we can expect to see a greater reliance on categorical grants from state governments so that more state monies can be diverted to their normally wealthier districts. (Richer districts do not usually benefit from general state aid programs in which funding is inverse to local district wealth.) Categorical funding is also utilized for urban districts to push additional state monies toward high-poverty areas. It may be time to look at a package of "rural categoricals" as part of the political dealmaking that takes place in establishing these funding programs. Such categorical grants could be used to address sparsity factors in areas in which a huge territory has to be covered just to get enough children together for a school. Extraordinary pupil transportation costs could be considered, too.
- **Provide greater flexibility in accounting.** Virtually all school systems practice some form of fund accounting. It is often difficult for the poorer rural districts to have sufficient

monies in all of their various school funds at all times. Said another way, the smaller overall cash balance of many rural schools, distributed across a large number of funds, leaves an insufficient amount in any one fund and contributes to cash flow problems. Instead of separating monies for purposes related to such things as salaries, pupil transportation, and the like into separate funds; combining or consolidating funds across numerous purposes could provide the day-to-day cash flow needed in these districts without having to resort to short-term borrowing. Increasing debt limits under certain conditions (e.g., for school construction or essential capital expenditures) would also be of help in this regard.

- **Tie school districts into overarching rural development initiatives.** Rural school systems will only be as healthy as their communities. Linkages between school and community have to exist as ideas for rural economic development are acted upon. In suburban areas, developers' fees are routinely paid to schools around which new housing developments and the like are locating. While needing to be sensitive to what can be done to foster economic development in rural areas, it may be time to consider, for example, exempting school districts from tax abatement plans in those locales.
- **Incent consolidation.** To push consolidation in those places where it truly needs to happen, incentives must be provided to nudge the process along. Remember, the c-word is the one that rural legislators and policymakers dare not speak its name. Thus, local rural communities should receive a substantial reward for their effort when they realize the necessity to consolidate and respond in kind. Such incentives might take the form of debt payoff, coverage of salary differentials between consolidating districts, or capital funding for new facilities arising from consolidation. Of course, this idea assumes that consolidation remains an optimal public policy solution to the problems facing many rural schools. It may be that, in time, new models of schooling (e.g., online or "virtual" high schools or increased cooperation with regional community colleges) will render this recommendation counterproductive—if not downright foolish.

Unalterable circumstances in many rural communities and states will ensure that schools remain an essential expression of life in those areas. And the allure of "local control" is as strong when talking about rural districts as it is anywhere with respect to the governance of schools. But assuming that significant new revenue streams for rural areas do not become available, issues of efficiency and effectiveness will not disappear for these schools.

Proponents of consolidation argue that it saves money by improving efficiency as reflected in reduced per-pupil operating expense and, in turn, lower tax rates for rural communities. While this notion is a popular one, it is not supported by any definitive



research. However, consolidation does offer the opportunity to make better use of the funds that are available, because they can be reallocated for different purposes more closely centered around instruction (e.g., the savings from one superintendent's salary may pay for two or three new teachers in the newly consolidated system). And that probably has to be the test for whether or not consolidation should take place: Can more and varied learning opportunities be made available to children in a consolidated setting for approximately the same amount of money spent in two or more weaker school systems?

Organizational capacity building has to take on a new emphasis in rural schools and their communities. Rural school districts will certainly need to display a greater willingness to address these concerns—whether by consolidation or something less drastic—for the sake of maintaining their political support and ensuring their survival. To do otherwise will surely create a system of "haves" and "have-nots" between children in rural areas and children everywhere else.

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Before arriving at Southern Illinois University, Randy Dunn served as a principal and superintendent of schools in four rural districts in Illinois. In addition, he has served as a consultant for rural school systems in states such as Illinois, Tennessee, and South Carolina. Dunn's interest in rural education issues stems from his own rural background. His interest in rural education policy began at the University of Illinois with his dissertation research on the impact of teacher unions on school improvement in rural districts.

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